



The Royal College of Surgeons of England

A brief history of the College

The origin of The Royal College of Surgeons is to be found in the history of two corporations that flourished in the City of London more than six hundred years ago – the Company of Barbers and the Guild of Surgeons. After a long period of rivalry (for, in the Middle Ages, surgery was often performed by barbers) the status and functions of the two professions were regulated by Act of Parliament in 1540, and the combined Company of Barber-Surgeons was established. Henry VIII personally presented the Act of Union to the masters and court of the new company. The scene is depicted in Holbein's painting, which hangs in the Edward Lumley Hall of the College.

The barbers and the surgeons maintained a rather uneasy partnership for two centuries. During the early part of the 18th century, due largely to the building of new hospitals in London and the rebuilding of the old ones, the number and importance of surgeons increased and with it a firm desire for independence. A separate Company of Surgeons was eventually established in 1745 after the great surgeon and anatomist William Cheselden has prompted Parliament to act. Soon after its formation, the Company of Surgeons established its Hall on the east side of the Old Bailey, next to Newgate Prison.

At the turn of the century, two events of great importance took place. In 1799 John Hunter's unique collection of specimens was given in trust to the Company of Surgeons by the Government and, in the following year, the Company received its first Royal Charter and became the Royal College of Surgeons in London, moving to a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields. It became the Royal College of Surgeons of England – a significant change – in 1843.

Shortly after receiving the Charter in 1800, the Court of the new College drew up plans for a fine new building in Lincoln's Inn Fields to house the Hunterian Museum, the Library, the lecture theatre and the Court Room. Eventually the building was completed in 1813 but, only twenty years later, total reconstruction was needed. Charles Barry was appointed as architect and incorporated more museum space and a new lecture theatre in his design; further extensions, including more space for the library, were made towards the end of the century.

The next work of significance was the construction of the research laboratories on the upper floors of the College, carried out in 1936/37, shortly before World War II. More laboratory space was provided at a special research centre at Downe, in Kent, adjacent to Down House which had formerly been the home of Charles Darwin.

In May 1941, the College received several direct hits during a bombing raid. Much of the building was in ruins and over half of the 60,000 specimens in the Hunterian Museum was destroyed, including two-fifths of Hunter's original collection which had been given to the Company of Surgeons in 1799. The reconstruction of the College could not begin until 1952 and was completed in 1957. It was only made possible by the outstanding generosity of a number of benefactors, including the late Lord Marks and members of his family, and the late Lord Nuffield who financed the building of residential accommodation to enable some ninety postgraduate students from overseas to live in the College.

In 1953 the College was adjudged by the House of Lords to be a charity, since its activities were – and are – designed for the good of the community and not for the self-interest of its Fellows.